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ABSTRACT

This document is intended to help communities plan and implement initiatives modeled after Making Academics Count, a campaign that was launched in 1997 by the Business Coalition for Education Reform (BCER) to encourage employers to ask job applicants for their school records and thereby help motivate students to achieve at higher levels. The guide begins with background information on the campaign and tools developed by the BCER to support implementation of school records initiatives. Presented next are lessons learned from Making Academics Count campaigns in 16 communities in 11 states. The following steps in planning, organizing, and implementing a Making Academics Count campaign are detailed: (1) ensure the business community leads the practice; (2) integrate the campaign into other state/local education reform efforts; (3) educate employers on obtaining and using school records; (4) develop outreach mechanisms to convey the initiative's message; (5) gain endorsements and collaborate with key constituencies; and (6) have a point of contact for employers and other constituencies. Also included are the following materials: steps in planning for sustainability; profiles of school records initiatives in Maryland and Greater Cleveland, Ohio; and lists of resource publications, program contacts, and sponsors of the Making Academics Count Campaign. (MN)

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MAKING ACADEMICS COUNT

MAKING ACADEMICS COUNT:

ACTION GUIDE

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For more information about the "Successful Strategies" series or to inquire about additional BCER resources, please contact bcer@nab.com.

INTRODUCTION

89 percent of students said they would work harder in school if they knew someone would ask for their school record.

(Public Agenda, 1999)

For more than a decade, the business community has promoted an education reform agenda that focuses on high academic standards, rigorous assessments, and accountability. Business leaders know that today's students are tomorrow's employees. They also know that the fast-paced knowledge economy demands these employees possess increasingly sophisticated levels of knowledge and skills. But far too many of today's young people, especially those not immediately bound for college, have little incentive to reach high levels of educational achievement. As a result, of the more than one-third[1] of students who do not immediately attend higher education institutions, many leave high school ill prepared to enter the workplace.

Business leaders, educators and coalitions across the nation agree that asking for school records from high school students or recent graduates is a low-cost, simple step businesses can undertake to help motivate students to achieve at higher levels. But putting the theory into practice—going beyond support on paper—is often a challenge.

This *Action Guide* is designed to help communities contemplating implementation of school records initiatives to plan and structure activities. The lessons identified are intended to reduce the planning time and obstacles so even more employers can send the message to students that, "Yes! School counts!"

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[1] Jobs for the Future. (1998). School-to-Career Initiative Demonstrates Significant Impact on Young People. Available: http://www.jff.org/pdfs/%20and/%20downloads/promisingdata.pdf

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BACKGROUND

MAKING ACADEMICS COUNT

Since the Business Coalition for Education Reform* (BCER) launched the *Making Academics Count* campaign in 1997 encouraging employers to ask for school records in the hiring process, over 20,000 businesses of all sizes and industry sectors across the country have adopted the practice. Through their participation, employers are both showing they care how a student performs in school and making more informed hiring decisions.

School records provide businesses with information about an applicant—grades, courses taken, even attendance habits—that would not otherwise be available. Employers report that using school records is especially useful when interviewing high school students or recent graduates—applicants who may not have much of a work history. The school record can provide background information on the applicant, and begin a dialogue about the applicant's interests, activities, attitudes, goals, and habits in and out of school.

Since 1997, the BCER has developed several tools to help employers, educators, and coalitions involved in implementing school records initiatives, including:

- *Hiring Smart: A Business Leader's Guide to Using School Records in Hiring* **a legal brief**, and *Hiring Smart*, **a guide for human resources professionals** outlining how to legally incorporate school records into the hiring process;
- A **national advertising campaign**, that includes localizable ads, developed in conjunction with the Ad Council;
- A web site, www.makeacademicscount.org, that includes an **Honor Roll** of employers participating in the campaign, as well as campaign resources and profiles of local initiatives from across the country; and

* Members include: American Business Conference, The Business Roundtable, Business-Higher Education Forum, Chamber of Commerce of the United States, Committee for Economic Development, The Conference Board, Council on Competitiveness, The Council of Growing Companies, National Alliance of Business, National Association of Manufacturers, National Association of Women Business Owners, U.S. Hispanic Chamber of Commerce, and Utility Business Education Coalition

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- **Certificates** for schools to show appreciation for their participation and **stickers** for businesses to place in their windows advertising their participation in the campaign.

LESSONS LEARNED

In 1998, the BCER began working closely with six communities—Santa Cruz, California; Greater Miami Dade County, Florida; the State of Maryland; Rochester, New York; Northeast Ohio; and Warwick, Rhode Island[1]. The BCER provided assistance to the pilot communities, in areas such as employer engagement, student and parent communications, and teacher support. With a growing amount of interest in the campaign across the country, the experiences of these six pilot sites provided a useful background to assist other communities developing their own initiatives.

At the same time, questions from other community initiatives shifted from how to launch a school records campaign to how to craft an effective initiative to positively impact students and businesses. As a result, the National Alliance of Business, a BCER partner, contracted with the Northwest Regional Education Lab to launch an assessment of school records initiatives in sixteen communities in eleven states—Delaware, Florida, Maryland, Michigan, New Jersey, New York, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, Tennessee, and Texas.

The following represents lessons learned from that assessment and interactions with communities involved in the campaign from across the country. The lessons in **Planning, Implementation, and Sustainability** are intended to help local partnerships develop effective school records initiatives that, combined with standards-based education reform, begin to transform the education culture to one of high expectations and high achievement.

[1] Business coalitions were key partners the efforts in many of these communities, including Maryland Business Roundtable, a state-wide business organization, the Greater Miami Chamber of Commerce in Miami, Florida, the Cleveland Greater Growth Association in Northeast Ohio, the Rochester Business-Education Alliance in Rochester, New York, and the Chamber Education Foundation in Warwick, Rhode Island.

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PLANNING AND ORGANIZING

Ensure the Business Community Leads the Practice. To begin to broadly influence student motivation in a community, a "critical mass" of participating employers must ask for school records as part of the hiring process. Educators can repeatedly warn students that their school achievement is important to getting a job, but when businesses actually ask for the school record, they send the message home.

In many communities, employers have found it useful to utilize an intermediary organization—such as a business-led coalition—to reduce duplication and coordinate efforts. Business-led coalitions, which vary in their mission, membership, size, and longevity, are groups of business leaders compelled to collective action by unmet workforce needs at the regional, state, and local levels. These coalitions have very different names—from associations to business-education partnerships to Chambers of Commerce—but they all play a critical role in articulating business needs, representing business leadership at the national, regional, state, and local levels, and working systemically to reach solutions to problems affecting the business community.

The nature of business-led coalitions in communities provide a natural match for school records campaigns for several reasons:

1. **Contacts:** Business-led coalitions often have established ties with both the business and education communities. The coalition can use these relationships to communicate the importance of the school records initiative.
2. **Staff:** As part of their mission to help businesses reach solutions to unmet workforce needs, business-led coalitions may have staff time and funding that can be devoted to the effort. The coalition staff can also serve as a resource, answering the many questions about procedure, legal issues, and communications that accompany a policy shift.
3. **Perspective:** Business-led coalitions represent the interests of many businesses in the areas of education reform and workforce development. By working with their member businesses—and recruiting others—the coalition can work across the business community to send a consistent message to students: *What you do in school matters in the world of work.*

In York, Pennsylvania, the local Chamber of Commerce responded to business needs for quick, reliable information on applicants by creating the Business Education Network (BEN). This interactive web site provides businesses and young job seekers—high school students and recent graduates—a way to connect to one another. The on-line database allows employers to search by job classification, type of employment sought, prior work experience, and student activities. Job seekers have access to a list of internships as well as part-time and full-time jobs.

The York Chamber of Commerce worked with local high schools to integrate the BEN into high school coursework, such as business education courses. Students can create and edit their resume on-line, and include extra information such as grades and attendance, which are verified by school personnel, assuring local businesses that the information is accurate.

Integrate the Campaign into other State/Local Education Reform Efforts. The campaign should not be an isolated initiative, but part of a systemic effort aimed at improving student achievement and preparing students for higher education and the workplace. Many business leaders are active in education reform and workforce preparedness efforts—asking for school records in the hiring process is a good step for those already engaged to further motivate students to perform well in school.

Educate Employers on How to Obtain and Use the School Record. Employers need to work with schools and applicants to determine how the record will be delivered, and articulate what they want to learn from school records.

- Employers need a consistent policy for when, and when not, to request school records. For example, an employer may request school records from all the candidates applying for a particular position, or all job candidates who attended high school within the last three years. Employers should not use the school record to request or gather information that could be used for purposes of discrimination, such as a job candidate's sex, race, national origin or disability.

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- Businesses must decided whether to use transcripts or a valid proxy. Many communities use the transcript produced by the local schools; in others the business community has joined with local schools to create a more employer-friendly record of student achievement in school.
- Typically, companies look at the school record for indicators of success on the job such as math, science or English skills; rate of tardiness and attendance; and students' willingness to take and complete advanced courses. Local educators can help business leaders learn how to interpret transcripts, explaining course level of difficulty and how to decipher the language and abbreviations often used in school records.
- Businesses should decide up front whether job applicants will provide their own transcripts or give permission to request them directly from schools. In either case, schools should be informed and prepared to respond to these requests.
- Use the data on the transcript or school records as just one of many sources of information about the job applicant. Employers should not use a transcript as a single or final determinant in making a selection.

Enumclaw, Washington's public high school responded to local businesses by developing an alternative transcript measuring student employability skills as well as academics.

The Rochester Business Education Alliance in Rochester, New York created a certificate of employability showing potential employers that students had met minimum criteria for grades, attendance, and work skills.

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Develop Outreach Mechanisms to Convey Your Message. Publicly announce intentions to request student records as part of the hiring process so that students, parents and teachers know that from now on, academics count. Different messages and outreach mechanisms must be developed to engage different audiences. Communities have found that tailoring messages to each audience—businesses, students, parents, teachers, and school administrators—is an effective way to promote the campaign.

> In Washington, Partnership for Learning developed separate outreach materials for parents, students, school principals, and the business community. Campaign brochures are aimed at answering specific questions of each group, and each has a specific section on the campaign's web site.

IMPLEMENTING

Gain Endorsements and Collaborate with Key Constituencies. School records campaigns are most effective when they are run in collaboration with the business community and other groups—such as school administrators, board members, teachers, state/local education associations, other business organizations, and parents. It is extremely important for these groups to make students aware of the campaign.

> In Delaware, employers complained that it took too much time for schools to send applicants' transcripts. The Delaware Business, Industry, Education Alliance worked with school counselors across the state, providing each guidance counselor's office free fax machines in exchange for a promise to send transcripts to employers within 48 hours of receiving the request.

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Have a Point of Contact for Employers and other Constituencies. It helps to have a central information bank, such as the staff of a local business-led coalition, an employer, or a contact at a local school, that is poised to answer questions for all constituencies on state and local laws, policies for school record access and use, and other topics. These answers can alleviate fears of litigation and help spur action on the initiative.

In New Jersey, the Business Coalition for Excellence in Education (BCEE), a part of the New Jersey State Chamber of Commerce, adopted the School Counts! campaign. School Counts! encourages employers around the state to ask for the School Counts! credential from applicants, demonstrating that the student has made a "C" or above in all academic courses, achieved a 95% or better attendance rate, is on course or has completed high school in eight consecutive semesters, and has taken more courses than the minimum graduation requirements.

BCEE staff worked with hundreds of employers and educators across the state, explaining the initiative, providing materials (such as the School Counts! credential and marketing materials, as well as resources from the national campaign, such as Hiring Smart) and speakers to spread the message to students, and answering questions from all sides. Two years later, with nearly 1,000 businesses across the state involved, businesses and educators in New Jersey know they can call on BCEE staff to answer questions or provide resources as necessary.

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PLANNING FOR SUSTAINABILITY

Participating communities agree that it is not enough to merely introduce school records initiatives, conduct training, and then expect the initiative to maintain strength and momentum on its own. If a community initiative is not regularly reviewed and reinvigorated, it can quickly suffer from neglect and fail to achieve its promise.

Communities should especially prepare for:

- **Personnel turnover:** All organizations regularly experience staff turnover. Before a school records policy becomes part of business's and schools' standard operating procedure, there will be a special need to orient new leadership and participants to the initiative. Even when the campaign is entrenched, new employees must understand the background, purpose, and responsibility associated with the initiative. This continuing education should be anticipated when communities are planning school records initiatives.
- **Review and evaluation:** To ensure effectiveness, the initiative should include scheduled time for leaders and stakeholders to periodically review the initiative, evaluate its effectiveness against established goals, and make a decision about whether to continue the initiative, fine-tune it, or expand it. Leaders and participants should be challenged to evaluate their participation and the ongoing value of the effort. This review process should utilize feedback from all stakeholders—businesses, students, teachers, school administrators, and parents—and look for ways to continuously improve.
- **Company engagement:** It is important to regularly ensure that businesses are incorporating the practice into standard operating procedure, not just lending support on paper. Sometimes all it takes is regular communication to remind businesses of the importance of using school records in hiring and of their commitment to support the initiative.

MAKING ACADEMICS COUNT IN ACTION

The next section highlights some partnerships between business and education that are working to create successful school records initiatives, showing students across the country that, "Yes, school counts!"

Action Profile: Maryland Business Roundtable for Education

For years, Maryland business leaders, like others across the nation, have faced a skilled labor shortage, making it difficult to find qualified entry-level workers. Many students graduate from high school without a strong foundation in communication, problem solving, mathematics, reading, writing, and technology skills, partly because many students, especially those not initially bound for postsecondary education, see no connection between what they do in school and what they do in the world of work.

In 1998, the Maryland Business Roundtable for Education (MBRT), a coalition of 120 leading Maryland businesses committed to education reform, launched *Achievement Counts!*, a statewide campaign to encourage Maryland employers to use high school transcripts in the hiring process. By 2001, the initiative was endorsed by nineteen business organizations and 21 local Chambers of Commerce, and has received positive coverage from local newspapers and business journals.

As part of the *Achievement Counts!* campaign, the MBRT sponsors a Speakers Bureau, sending young business representatives to speak to ninth-grade students stressing the importance of high achievement in school. During the course of the presentations, speakers provide a realistic picture of the workforce, including career options, educational requirements for specific jobs, potential salaries, and the average cost of living in the state. By 2001, more than 350 members of the Speakers Bureau gave over 1,000 presentations at 54 schools reaching over 25,000 students.

In 2000, the MBRT participated in an assessment by the Northwest Regional Education Laboratory and the National Alliance of Business. Key findings include:

- **Ninety-eight percent** of Maryland **employer** survey respondents felt it was a good idea to use school records as part of the hiring process for entry-level job applicants;
- **Seventy-five percent** of Maryland **employer** survey respondents thought school attendance rate was very important information in the hiring process;
- **One hundred percent** of Maryland **educator** survey respondents felt it was a good idea for employers to use school records in the hiring process;
- **Sixty-six percent** of Maryland **student** survey respondents felt it was a good idea for employers to use school records in the hiring process; and
- **Forty-seven percent** of Maryland **student** survey respondents said they would ask students for their high school records if they were an employer.

Achievement Counts! receives support from nine statewide education groups: the American Federation of Teachers – Maryland, the Maryland Association of Boards of Education, the Maryland Association of Elementary School Principals, the Maryland Association of Secondary School Principals, the Maryland Congress of Parents and Teachers, the Maryland Higher Education Commission, the Maryland State Department of Education, the Maryland State Teachers Association, and the Public School Superintendents Association of Maryland.

For more information on *Achievement Counts!* or the Maryland Business Roundtable for Education, contact the Maryland Business Roundtable for Education, 111 S. Calvert Street, Suite 1720, Baltimore, MD 21202. Phone: 410-727-0448, Fax: 410-727-7699, E-mail: mail@mbrt.org, Web Site: www.mbrt.org

Action Profile: Greater Cleveland Growth Association

The Career Passport is a credential that identifies and describes the skills of the individual high school student. It was developed by the state of Ohio in 1990 in specific response to the requests of employers, who wanted more information about the skills of vocational graduates as part of the hiring process.

In 1998, Ohio's state education reform legislation required schools to use the Career Passport for all students as part of K-12 career exploration activities. Beginning in elementary school, students are exposed to a variety of different careers, and in junior high participate in activities promoting serious thought about career preparation. In high school, the Career Passport serves as a repository for student work and records to be considered by employers and higher education admissions officers. In 2000, ninety-five percent of students in the state completed Career Passports.

The Career Passport consists of a series of standard components:

- A personal data sheet or resumé developed by the student;
- Validation of skills a student has achieved such as specific academic, occupational or employability skills;
- Student writing samples;
- A transcript that shows grades, courses taken, and school attendance; and
- Copies of diplomas, certificates, licenses, or any other pertinent credentials the student has earned.

In 1999, the Greater Cleveland Growth Association, working through the Business and Education Network (BEN), a regional clearinghouse for employer participation in education activities throughout Northeast Ohio, launched *Ask for the Career Passport*, a regional campaign to inform and encourage employers to use students' Career Passports in the hiring process. The intent of the campaign is for businesses to

support education by sending a clear message to students that their grades and attendance impact their future employability. At the same time, the campaign aims to help employers understand the benefits asking for the Career Passport can bring to their companies. By late 2000, over 800 employers in Northeast Ohio signed on to support the initiative.

In 2000, *Ask for the Career Passport* participated in an assessment from the Northwest Regional Education Lab and the National Alliance of Business. The evaluation found that:

- **Ninety-seven percent** of Ohio **employer** survey respondents thought that it was a good idea for businesses to use the Career Passport as part of the hiring process for entry-level job applicants;
- About **fifty percent** of Ohio **business** survey respondents felt that employer use of the Career Passport contributed to the quality of the hiring process;
- **One hundred percent** of Ohio **educator** survey respondents thought businesses should use the Career Passport in the hiring process; and
- About **sixty-six percent** of Ohio **student** survey respondents thought it was a good idea for businesses to use student records in the hiring process.

For more information on *Ask for the Career Passport*, contact The Greater Cleveland Growth Association, 200 Tower City Center, 50 Public Square, Cleveland, OH 44113, Phone: (216) 621-3300, Fax: (216) 687-6788, Web Site: http://www.benpathfinder.com

RESOURCES

Making Academics Count brochure. This easy-to-read brochure illustrates the importance of using transcripts in the hiring process and provides tips for getting started.

An Employer's Guide to Using School Records in Hiring Decisions—A Legal Guide. This legal brief, researched and written by the Equal Employment Advisory Council (EEAC), is the most comprehensive review of case law concerning the use of student records in hiring.

Hiring Smart—An Employer's Guide to Using School Records. This resource guide provides specific strategies and tips for companies to use school records in the hiring process.

School Counts! A public service announcement (PSA) developed by many of the BCER members, the Educational Excellence Partnership, and the Ad Council, is available for localization and placement in print media.

Making Academics Count Web Site (www.makingacademicscount.org). This site features companies and communities across the country that use school records in the hiring process; answers frequently asked questions; displays media coverage and journal articles; lists the growing "Honor Roll" of companies that ask for school records; and describes other efforts that support the use of school records in hiring.

Employer Outreach Tools. Window stickers demonstrate employers' participation in the campaign.

Educator Appreciation Tools. Certificates recognize schools' participation in the campaign.

All of the above *Making Academics Count* publications and other resources are available at **www.makingacademicscount.org** or by calling **(800) 787-2848**.

CONTACT INFORMATION

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Greater Cleveland Growth Association
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www.mbrt.org

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www.partnership4learning.org or
www.askfortranscripts.org

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www.rochester.k12.ny.us/district/workforce_prep/rbea.htm

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The Making Academics Count Campaign is supported by the following organizations:

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Achieve, Inc.
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Business Coalition for Education Reform
Business-Higher Education Forum
Committee for Economic Development
Council of Growing Companies
Council on Competitiveness
National Alliance of Business
National Association of Manufacturers
National Association of Women Business Owners
National Education Association
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Education Groups

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National Association of Elementary School Principals
National Association of Partners in Education
National Association of Secondary School Principals
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BCER
Business Coalition for Education Reform

The BCER, a coalition managed by the National Alliance of Business, is comprised of 13 national business-led coalitions working in partnership with over 1,300 state and local business-led organizations to improve academic achievement for all students by supporting and expanding business involvement in education at the national, state, and local levels. The BCER supports efforts to: 1) raise academic standards for all students, 2) ensure standards reflect the knowledge and skills needed for workplace success, and 3) help the public understand the critical need for world-class academic standards and necessary changes needed for school systems to deliver them. Members include American Business Conference, Business-Higher Education Forum, The Business Roundtable, Committee for Economic Development, Council on Competitiveness, The Conference Board, Council of Growing Companies, National Alliance of Business, National Association of Manufacturers, National Association of Women Business Owners, Utility Business Education Coalition, US Chamber of Commerce, US Hispanic Chamber of Commerce. Affiliate Members include Achieve, Inc., National Association of Partners in Education, and the US Department of Education.

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